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Lifelong learning as enactment for education in Norway: 'From cradle to grave . . .'

Hans Jørgen Braathe[a,*], Ann Merete Otterstad[a]

[a]*Faculty of Teacher Education and International Studies, Oslo and Akershus University College, Pilestredet 52, N-0132 Oslo, Norway*

Abstract

The background for our study is global trends and traditions of lifelong learning discourses. By analysing political educational documents, we investigate how effects of lifelong learning discourses create shifts in the understanding of professionalism in the landscape of early childhood and schooling in Norway. Building on Foucault's notion of apparatus[†], we discuss the role of inscriptions like flexibility, outcomes, indicators, and results, among other factors, in securing lifelong learning opportunities as apparatus for change.

Keywords: Lifelong learning, discursive positioning, professionalism, teacher education;

1. Introduction

In this paper, we explore how Nordic discourses of education are influenced by internationally prevalent neo-liberal discourses and how they influence and change professional praxis. This influence brings in and transfers certain epistemologies and domains of power (Foucault, 1980), which might regulate spaces for professional becoming(s) (Ball, 2003).

Norway has been influenced by international trends within education, but at the same time it has retained its national identity. In this paper, the concept of lifelong learning is used as assemblage[‡] to disclose enactments leading up to emerging ideological shifts, which follow international trends, in the beginning of the new millennium. New and revised reforms in the educational system are analysed by identifying in official documents shifting and competing discourses about teaching and learning. These reforms lead up to our present situation in Norway, with a new teacher education program for primary and lower secondary school implemented from August 2010 on, and plans for a new preschool teacher education program scheduled for implementation by August 2013. This paper identifies how lifelong learning can be seen as an apparatus for how the discursive shifts in official documents position teachers as professionals. Before we critically analyse the White Papers that led up to contemporary teacher

* Hans Jørgen Braathe. Tel.: +47 22 45 21 74
E-mail address: HansJorgen.Braathe@hioa.no

† For the notion of apparatus, or 'dispositif', see Foucault (1978, p. 25). For the idea of assemblage, or putting together components which are 'fabricated' in different temporal and spatial contexts, see Rose 1999, p. 53.

‡ We use the concept assemblage here entangled with technologies of aspirations, knowledge, practices of calculations etc., which shape specific professional subjectivities (Rose, 1999).

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education reforms, we present the most distinctive feature of childhood and schooling in the Nordic countries in order to allow the reader to begin to reflect critically on the current changes in pedagogical praxis in Norway.

2. Nordic childhood as ideology

Some central characteristics of the ideal of a *good* Nordic childhood are articulated in primary school and early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. According to Kristjánsson (2006), these characteristics include the following: 'naturalness of childhood; equity and egalitarianism; democracy defined as lived experience for children; freedom, conceptualized as autonomy to play and to develop one's own self; emancipation, or liberation from over-supervision and over-control by adults; warm and cooperative social relationship with adults and peers; and solidarity with Nordicness, or connecting with Nordic heritage through consistent enactment of distinct cultural tradition' (In Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2008, p. 265; see also Haugen, 2010). These ideas are documented in public policy and the Norwegian Curriculum Framework plan for Kindergartens (2011), which indicate that children have the right to participate, that is, to have their voices respected and heard both from an individual and a collective position. This shall be reflected through the pedagogues' pedagogical praxis, which through its implementation is intended to realize the ideal of the *good* Nordic childhood. As such, the ideology of lifelong learning can threaten and regulate the *good* Nordic childhood construction, which is a phenomenon discussed in this paper.

3. Lifelong learning—a discursive shift in language

Lifelong learning has become a prominent concept in Norwegian educational discourse over the last ten years. The Norwegian educational discourse about teaching and learning can be characterized as challenging in different ways. Different discourses defining concerns about the quality of learning, addressing 'what works' in education regarding children from one to nineteen years, is multi-layered. One of the most foregrounded concepts in education since the end of the 1990s has been *lifelong learning* (Biesta, 2006; Edwards, 2010; Haugen, 2010; Vislie, 2008). This concept has been promoted through national and international policies (OECD) as a solution to the particular challenges of the contemporary age. It is used as a means to promote change in education, and in doing so it promotes further change in socio-political systems of governance (Foucault, 1980) and institutions for education and training, as well as in our understanding of the role of citizenship within society. Lifelong learning is therefore a significant phenomenon of our time and one that warrants close examination.

White Paper 16 (2006-2007), *Early Intervention for Lifelong Learning* (Ministry of Education, 2007), gives the political and ideological background and rationale for the political discourse underpinned by the concept of lifelong learning in the Norwegian context. As pointed out by Edwards (2010), '[i]n the 1990s lifelong learning became most closely linked to policy goals of developing a socially cohesive knowledge economy. This contrasted with the earlier goals of lifelong education as a contributor to democratic citizenship' (p. 145). This contrast, between lifelong education and lifelong learning, can be identified in the competing educational discourses underpinning the displacements identified in White Paper 16 (2006-2007) (Haugen, 2010).

White Paper 31 (2007-2008), *Quality in School* (Ministry of Education, 2008), and White Paper 41 (2007-2008), *Quality in Kindergarten* (Ministry of Education, 2008), provide the present government's political documents on the future of both schooling and early childhood. Both papers represent a discursive shift in the language from a social democratic discourse emphasising equal rights to education with the goal of democratic citizenship, towards a neoliberal 'quality discourse' underpinned by the notion of lifelong learning for the individual. The language change also changes the thinking and understanding of what schools' and kindergartens' mandate, or mission, should be. The White Papers make it clear that the present government, with the support of Parliament, is concerned with the quality of the teachers, pupils' skills, the result of the schools' and kindergartens' work, and the prominent term *competence*. Concepts of the *good* Nordic childhood ideology such as democracy, 'Bildung', critical thinking and so on do not take up much space in the White Papers. This new language presents the discourse about 'quality' in a knowledge economic sense; also called the instrumental discourse (Wilson, 2002) embedded in neo-liberal ideologies, and is challenging the *good* Nordic childhood ideology.

4. Positioning the teacher as an accountable professional

In Norway, the Ministry of Education has through White Papers 31 and 41 (2007-2008) introduced lifelong learning from early childhood up to the university level. The term can be perceived as part of management discourses intertwined with flexibility, outcomes, indicators and results, and entangled with *accountability*. Economic rationalities seem to become steering mechanisms.

Stray (2011) argues that in political documents schools have been described in different ways—from having a social mandate to being given a social mission, which is the predominant description today. We will argue that this is also a shift when it comes to the discursive positioning of the teachers. This positioning influences the teacher as a professional and the autonomy of the teaching profession. A mandate gives autonomous teachers responsibility and trust, but having a mission establishes accountability for achieving results defined by that mission. This political thinking influences the professionals to become ethically, morally and professionally accountable for what counts as valid knowledge for children in early childhood settings and children and students in learning situations. We examine this shift in recent reforms in teacher education in Norway by asking how political and ideological proposals enact and inscribe discursive positions for the new teacher.

5. Teacher education reforms

The notion of *lifelong learning* includes both accountability and responsibility. *Professional competencies* seem to become a key concept when the Norwegian Ministry of Education asks for revisions of teacher education. As mentioned above, in White Paper 16 (2006-2007) the role of education shifts from educating democratic citizens to focusing on individuals' teachability and learnability, which puts emphasis on children's and students' learning outcomes. Learning has become a matter of possibilities, or perhaps a duty, in every stage in life. This gives each and every person a responsibility for taking the opportunity, or accepting the duty, to learn (Biesta, 2006). A strong incentive for improving the quality of schools is the requirement that education adapt to international testing regimes, especially TIMMS and PISA.

6. Literacies becomes competencies

Norway has taken part in the PISA tests since their beginning in 2000, but in the 1990s OECD had already started planning using educational indicators for nations' economic developmental potential. Discussion of these indicators, which measure *literacy* in students' performance in reading, mathematics and science, were also part of the Norwegian educational discourse and are part of the quality discourse argued for in White Papers 31 and 41 (2007-2008). The concept of literacy has in the Norwegian context been translated and inscribed into competence, and the frequency of the use of competency has been high in all the White Papers describing teachers' knowledge.

7. Teacher education for primary schools, lower secondary schools and early childhood

We further analyse the White Papers that led up to new curricula in teacher education for primary and lower secondary schools in 2003 and 2010, by tracing the enactments and assemblages that made lifelong learning a predominant concept.

The background to White Paper 16 (2001-2002) is the reorganization of teacher education in light of a new degree system for assessing students, that is, the Bologna process. The changes proposed in the White Paper are mainly justified by self-evaluation of what works, but they are justified also by the political basis of an internationalisation of education and comparison with other teacher education programs. The internationalisation includes criteria outlined in the Framework for Qualifications associated with the notion of lifelong learning initiated by the Bologna process. The rationales were related to extensive and rapid changes in society, and to a need to be competitive in a globalised economy. In this sense,

> [t]hese ideas signify notions that are a far cry from any certainty about the teleological goals of education and how they are to be achieved. They are based upon processes of constant invention in response to others rather than ultimate processes as ends. (Edwards, 2010, p. 154)

Teacher *competency* is designed as a necessary condition for implementing the latest school reforms, and the solutions are largely framed and inscribed in the form of more *competencies*.

With reference to international and national tests, the 'problem' addressed in White Paper 11 (2008-2009) is that 'Norwegian students have weaker results than the government wants' (Ministry of Education 2009:10). The solutions (and responsibilities) are tied largely to teacher education and teachers, and consistently associated with a number of qualities that are characteristic of the *good* teacher, emerging from selected research as enactments referred to in the White Paper. Chapter 2 first asserts that the requirements and competencies a teacher must have are very extensive and also characterized by a variety of complexities (p. 15). It then lists a number of areas of competence a teacher must possess, which are based on 'standards and expectations in national management areas and on the basis of what the Norwegian and international research documents are showing' (Ministry of Education, 2009:15). This White Paper focuses mostly on professional, didactic and management competencies. These are related to students' learning outcomes, and they emerge and are justified with reference to research enactments.

The outcome of White Paper 11 (2008-2009) is the current teacher education reform, GLU, 'National Curriculum Regulations for Differentiated Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education Programmes for Years 1–7 and Years 5–10' (Ministry of Education, 2010). This reform represents a definitive break with the social democratic ideology associated with the *good* Nordic childhood that positioned the teacher as a general teacher with a wide spectrum of cross-curricular and social responsibilities, certified to teach all school disciplines from grades 1 to 10. GLU positions the new primary and lower secondary teacher to work in the 'quality' school within the instrumental discourse for lifelong learning. GLU requires educators to specialise in teaching at certain grade levels, either grades 1 to 7 or 5 to 10, and, furthermore, it requires student teachers to specialise in fewer disciplines. This new emphasis on teacher specialisation can be read as an ideological shift from education to lifelong learning as described above (Biesta, 2006).

Considering lifelong learning as a strategy in early childhood education, White Paper 41 [§], *Quality in Kindergartens* (2007-2008), positions learning as one of three main goals, which are as follows: ensuring equity and high quality in all kindergartens, strengthening the kindergarten as a learning area and allowing all children to participate in an inclusive community. These goals fit into the emphasis on 'high quality' discourses in relation to learning and lifelong learning.

In the first point, underlining equity and quality independent of geographical or socioeconomic location, the apparatus of lifelong learning can be read as acting on the ideologies of the good Nordic childhood. The next goal indicates that children have a right, and duty, to learn from cradle to grave. Investment for equalization is further related with and inscribed to increased focus on the future role of students in the workforce. One much-debated theme is a dropout rate of one-third of all young students in upper secondary schools, and White Paper 16 (2006-2007), *Early Intervention for Lifelong Learning* (Ministry of Education, 2007), establishes political goals by which education can address this problem.

It is stated in White Paper 41 (2007-2008) that 'all children should develop, learn and be well prepared for school attendance' (p. 3). This directive materialises a mission of *school readiness* for the kindergarten that should be measurable and for which the professionals should be held accountable. The strategy from the Ministry is repeatedly to argue for, and underline, the responsibility of the professional workers in kindergartens as active participants in the children's learning processes. These professionals *must* share their knowledge, be enthusiastic and inventive to evoke children's interests (in learning). The focus on 'quality' arises from the emphasis placed on cooperation with children and the responsibility of teachers for the children's learning. We would argue that this discursive shift from the *good* Nordic childhood discourse positions these professionals in a neoliberal discourse in which lifelong learning as an assemblage emerges as an apparatus positioning the new kindergarten teacher. This is similar to the situation in primary and lower secondary schools.

When issues of 'children's language skills' are described in the White Paper 41 (2007-2008), the professional is given a responsibility of developing language competencies. The professional competencies are considered the main indicators of the responsibility of teachers for how children lay the basis for their 'language competence' and readiness for school. Such an issue is followed up in the suggested revised National Qualification Framework for higher education (Bologna) in early childhood education. One of the quality assessments for the bachelor's degree

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[§] http://www.regjeringen.no/upload/KD/Vedlegg/Barnehager/Kvalitesmeldingen/FactsheetSTMeld41.pdf (downloaded 26.11.2011)

asks for graduates who have obtained knowledge about children's language development as well as about beginning reading and writing skills. Literacy, in the PISA understanding of the concept, becomes the early childhood student's new obtained competencies measured by the student's *school readiness*.

The revised framework plan for the bachelor's degree in ECEC (introduced in 2013) suggests a specialisation in six different knowledge fields. The content of these knowledge fields is nationally standardized, and these standards have been affected by international developments in teacher education. The students are encouraged to be flexible and mobile in their education throughout Europe. One important aspect related to our discussion is the naming of these professionals. Strong arguments favour kindergarten *teacher,* inscribing *teachability* and *learnability* as predominant concerns of the profession.

8. Competency as assemblage

In White Paper 16 (2001-2002), the competence concept is used with very high frequency (about 360 times). It is used about 240 times in White Paper 11 (2008-2009). Since competence is used so frequently and extensively, it can be described as a concept that is particularly open to be filled with different kinds of content. By examining how teacher competencies are related to other concepts, we can also identify how the concept is filled with meaning.

Literacies, as assessed by PISA, are supposed to be independent of the curriculum, and are described as individuals' capacity to identify and understand episodes in practical life using subject-related knowledge; as such, they are part of the lifelong learning discourse. Literacy as it is used in the PISA framework (OECD, 2006) is a communicative concept; it is focused on processes and not on product. These literacy constructs presume to assess students' ability to act as competent problem solvers. This again positions the teachers as accountable for developing these literacies. The PISA definition of literacies as enacting competencies underpins the two White Papers' discussions of professionalism and teachers' competencies.

Throughout the text of White Paper 11 (2008-2009), relationships are established among (1) research-based knowledge about the competencies that are important to student learning, (2) use of the OECD's definition of competence as manifested in the 'successful measures' like PISA and (3) a constant focus on student learning and performance. From these enactments, the inscription of competence emerges as an assemblage answering neo-liberal discursive challenges. This emerging assemblage underlines the notion that the teacher's formal competencies acquired through teacher education are not ends in themselves, or a guarantee of the desired outcomes, but rather a means to achieve the goals of better learning environments and better learning. While the degree of a teacher's competence is portrayed in White Paper 16 (2001-2002) as almost equal to teacher professionalism, White Paper 11 (2008-2009) describes competence to a greater extent as a prerequisite for teacher professionalism. It can be argued that in this representation the teacher is not *capable, competent and professional* unless s/he can successfully contribute to the students' learning and development. In this way teacher professionalism is also inscribed into the discourse of lifelong learning. It is also argued that it is not enough to entrust to teachers the responsibility to hold these competencies; this must be controlled. The need for increased external control of teacher competence can also be described as a shift from the responsibility and trust that were placed on teacher training, and a shift from education to learning and 'learnability' (Biesta, 2006).

Displacements in the two parliamentary White Papers, White Paper 16 (2001-2002) and White Paper 11 (2008-2009), illustrate how teacher competence is filled with partially different meanings over time. In earlier White Papers, competence is described as something the teachers 'have' rather than something they 'show' by producing results. The descriptions in the earlier documents articulate a greater degree of confidence in professional competencies acquired during teacher training, as something teachers have. In those documents, competency is also portrayed as something present in the teaching staff as a whole, with emphasis on the diverse experience of a group of colleagues. This discursive shift in the use of competence can again be seen as a shift in the understanding of teacher autonomy, as described earlier by Stray (2011) as part of the shift from the social democratic discourse, underpinned by the *good* Nordic childhood, to the quality discourse. In this way the new teacher positioned by White Paper 11 (2008-2009), to follow Edwards (2010), is seen as an assemblage that is 'based upon processes of constant invention in response to others' (p. 154) 'to reduce complexity' (p. 149).

The proposed revised kindergarten *teacher* education described above, with an inscribed mission of producing *school-ready* children, points in the same direction, positioning professionals for kindergarten by the apparatus of lifelong learning in the same assemblage of competencies.

9. Conclusion

In this paper, we have been inspired by Edwards' (2010) claim that lifelong learning, seen metaphorically as a journey, might be considered a reduction and stabilization, indicating 'both reduction *and* mastery, *and* emergent *and* inventive, *and* purified *and* translated, *and* stable *and* changing—multiple' (p. 151, our emphasis). As such, we do not wish to reduce the obligation of lifelong learning to a linear construction but to point also to the *productive* and temporal 'processes of constant invention in response to others' (p. 154). We have, however, elaborated how the apparatus of lifelong learning influences the education of new teachers in Norway, regulating professionals' becoming(s) by discursively positioning teachers as challenging the ideology of the *good* Nordic childhood. We wish to emphasise the *ands* to be considered in the eagerness to meet international standards for education. In this paper we have seen how *literacy*, as defined by PISA, fuels the lifelong learning apparatus, along with the construction of *competencies*.

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